

# Light

The image features three light purple flowers with yellow centers, set against a dark, textured background. The flowers are arranged in a triangular pattern, with one at the top right, one in the middle left, and one at the bottom center. A library stamp is visible on the middle-right flower.

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Cover: *Autumn crocuses, Reigate Hill, Surrey, UK*  
Picture by Roy Toms

*'...even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these'*  
[Matthew 6.29]

*Note: All Bible quotations are taken from the New King James Version (NKJV)  
except where another version is indicated after the text.*



# Bible Characters

## Solomon

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**W**HAT comes to mind when you hear the name “Solomon”? –Building a temple – many wives – great wealth – or perhaps wisdom? But is that all we know about this great king of Israel? Is there anything else we can learn about him from the Bible?

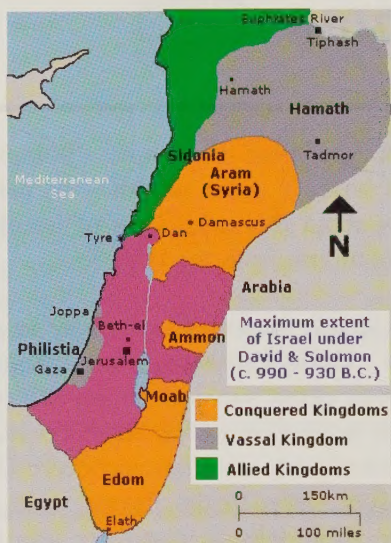
Solomon was the third king of Israel. Historically, he may be more well-known than his father David. David had many sons – Solomon was number ten. Amnon was David’s eldest son and natural heir to the throne but he was murdered at the instigation of his brother Absalom (see 2 Kings chapter 13). Then Absalom’s rebellion and death (see 2 Samuel chapters 15-18) left the succession to the throne wide open from a human point of view. The Bible tells us that there was some manoeuvring for the position which resulted in further bloodshed but not by Solomon (see 1 Kings chapters 1 and 2).

King David had built up a powerful nation, stretching from the border of Egypt to the River Euphrates. Israel was now a strong united kingdom but now David was old and who would reign after him? The record shows that David passed over those older sons and handed the throne of Israel to this seemingly inexperienced young man, Solomon.

### SOLOMON AS A YOUNG MAN

Solomon was 18 years old when he began to reign and even at this young age, he had special qualities that were lacking in David’s older sons. There was certainly divine guidance in the choice of Solomon by David. When we compare Solomon with his brothers, we see glimpses into the character of some of those other princes. For example, Absalom’s habit of riding in his chariot with 50 men running in front

of him. [2 Samuel 15.1] This show of self importance and pride by Absalom was noticeably absent from the character of Solomon in his younger days.



David was looking for a man who would have the character and ability to strengthen and stabilise this hard-won kingdom. The Bible tells us that Solomon reigned for forty years. This was a period of peace and prosperity that was never repeated in Israel's history. We read how David passed the kingdom to Solomon and instructed him with these words:

‘Then the days of David drew near that he should die, and he charged Solomon his son, saying: “I go the way of all the earth; be strong, therefore, and prove yourself a man. And keep the charge of the LORD your God: to walk in his ways...Therefore do according to your wisdom.”’

[1 Kings 2.1-3, 6]

David charged this favoured son to ‘*be strong*’ and ‘*prove yourself a man*.’ We note from David’s words, an indication perhaps that Solomon wasn’t the type to put on an outward show of physical strength or having the warrior-like aspirations that characterised his father. David is saying to him – you will need to be strong, especially with difficult characters still around. He urged Solomon to be strong in dealing with forceful men like Joab, the commander of the army. He said: ‘*Deal with him according to your wisdom*’. [1 Kings 2.6 NIV]



This quality of wisdom clearly set Solomon apart from his brothers. But the wisdom possessed by Solomon also gave him strength of character when it came to making difficult decisions. In this same chapter we witness a ruthless aspect to Solomon's character.

### GOD-GIVEN WISDOM

For example, Adonijah, his half-brother, asked to be given Abishag, one of David's widows as his wife. We are told that he was supported by Joab in making this request. [1 Kings 2.13-25] Straightaway, in his wisdom, Solomon saw through Adonijah and Joab's motives (to marry Abishag would put Adonijah in king David's position). And then we see his ruthlessness – he had Adonijah put to death, followed swiftly by Joab! We can see how he made a swift decision and followed it by ruthless actions! [1 Kings 2.46]



We are then told how God gave Solomon even more wisdom and discernment, 'I will give you a wise and discerning heart'. [1 Kings 3.10-14 NIV] The first test of Solomon's wise and discerning heart was dealing with a case of two women who had each given birth to a child. One child had died and there was an argument over whose baby it was that had survived. [1 Kings 3.16]

In this episode, we see Solomon practicing a certain amount of psychology. His decision played on the human emotions of a mother towards her newborn child. The thought of having her child cut in two in front of her was too much for the real mother, whereas in contrast

the other woman was not at all upset by Solomon's idea – cut it in two! Solomon's wise play had revealed who was the true mother solving a difficult problem. We read that *'When all Israel heard the verdict the king had given, they held the king in awe because they saw that he had wisdom from God to administer justice'.* [1 Kings 3. 28 NIV]

### SOLOMON'S HUMILITY

Solomon's reign began on a high note but most important was his standing in the eyes of the God of Israel. Solomon showed humility. *'I am a little child'* he said. [1 Kings 3. 7] In other words, although he was 18 years old, he asked for the help and guidance such as a little child needs. We can't doubt his sincerity here and the example of Solomon is a lesson for all who desire to seek God's help.

Solomon didn't ask for long life or riches for himself or for the death of his enemies. God responded by giving him this wise and discerning heart that he had asked for. But God also gave him what he didn't ask for – *'both riches and honour, so that there shall not be anyone like you among the kings all your days.'* [1 Kings 3.13]

### SOLOMON - THE ADMINISTRATOR

Solomon then applied these God-given gifts to the organisation of his kingdom. All successful nations and empires are well-organised. We now consider how he reorganized the administration of the kingdom of Israel. The 1st Book of Kings records the names of the officials he appointed to administer his affairs. [1 Kings 4. 1-6] These were the army commanders, the priests, his personal advisers, the man in charge of the palace and so on.

Then we have the names of the men he made governors over the twelve districts into which the kingdom was divided. [1 Kings 4.7-19] These divisions were not just for ease of administration. Each of these governors was responsible for supplying provisions to the royal household for one month of each year. [1 Kings 4.7] In today's world,

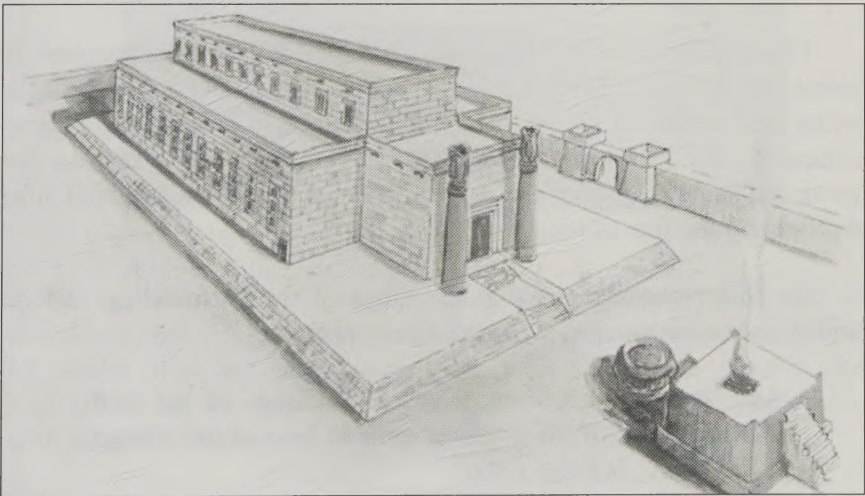


governments go about this by imposing national or local taxes. In this way revenue is raised to contribute towards the nation's wealth and well-being, and of course, the aims and ambitions of the rulers.

One great ambition of Solomon was to build a temple for worship in Jerusalem. However, because his father David had made preparations for the building of the temple, Solomon's task was made easier. He set about organizing the labour force and for that he enlisted the help of Hiram, king of Tyre.

### THE JERUSALEM TEMPLE

David had already established good relations with the Phoenicians, who lived in an area to the north of Israel which is now called Lebanon, Tyre being its principal city. So the building of his own palace and the temple in Jerusalem were completed in the first twenty years of his reign (*see 2 Chronicles 8. 1*).



This magnificent temple became the focal point for all the people of Israel – a place of worship for the one true God. This was in contrast to Israel's pagan neighbours who had their own temples and places of worship for their many idols. Jerusalem under Solomon now

became a famous place – a wonder that people must go and see and the fame of Solomon spread throughout the region that we now call the Middle East.

However, the Bible tells us that Solomon's wisdom made him famous for other reasons:

'And God gave Solomon wisdom and exceedingly great understanding, and largeness of heart... Thus Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the men of the East and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men...and his fame was in all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs, and his songs were one thousand and five. Also he spoke of trees, from the cedar tree of Lebanon even to the hyssop that springs out of the wall; he spoke also of animals, of birds, of creeping things, and of fish.' [1Kings 4. 29 -33]

This God-given wisdom covered a tremendous range of interests. It seems that he was a walking encyclopaedia! He was not only a prolific writer and author of many songs and proverbs, but was also a great naturalist. He taught about plant life – from the wild hyssop to the great cedars of Lebanon and his knowledge covered all animal life, reptiles and the fish of the rivers and seas.

He became so famous that the kings of the surrounding nations sent their ambassadors to seek Solomon's advice:

'And men of all nations, from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom, came to hear of the wisdom of Solomon.' [1 Kings 4. 34]

#### THE QUEEN OF SHEBA

One famous visitor was the Queen of Sheba who came with great pomp and ceremony desiring an audience with Solomon personally.



She questioned him on many things and was overwhelmed by everything she saw and heard. Her words are recorded for us:

‘Then she said to the king “It was a true report which I heard...about your words and your wisdom...I did not believe...until I came and saw it with my own eyes...Your wisdom and prosperity exceed the fame of which I heard...Blessed be the LORD your God, who delighted in you... therefore he made you king, to do justice and righteousness.”’ [1 Kings 10. 6-9]



We are told she gave Solomon gold, spices and precious stones in abundance, but the most important point to be noted is that the Queen of Sheba was not only impressed with Solomon's wealth and knowledge, but she was also fully aware of God's covenant relationship with Israel as a nation.

In the New Testament, Jesus himself mentions this Gentile queen in connection with the time of judgment at his second coming:

‘The Queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with

this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed **a greater than Solomon** is here.' [Matthew 12.42]

The point that Jesus was making is that the Queen of Sheba understood God's purpose with Israel by listening to Solomon and yet Jesus who was greater than Solomon was not being listened to as he expounded the Gospel message to the Jews of his day. Jesus reminded his hearers of the time when he will return to the earth to raise the dead, to judge those who are responsible and to re-establish the kingdom of God. The words of Jesus suggest that at that time the Queen of Sheba will stand in condemnation of those who heard the words of Jesus but did not believe in the one who was even '*greater than Solomon*'.

You too, can share in that future time of blessing promised in God's Word, if you prepare for it now by fully understanding the Gospel or good news of the kingdom of God and acting upon it.

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*Editor's note: Part two of this article will be included in the next issue.*



# ‘Glory to God in the highest’

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WHY do people suddenly start singing? It is usually because something has made them happy. It is often easier to express how one feels in the words of a song than by ordinary speech. If this is true of human singing, how significant must have been the occasion – only the second one on record – when a host of immortal angels spontaneously burst into song:

‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will towards men!’ [Luke 2.14]

Why was it that the angels were unable to restrain their joy on this occasion? It was because of an event for which they had been waiting for several thousand years. In the words of their spokesman to the humble shepherds in the plains of Bethlehem:

‘...behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.’ [Luke 2.10,11]

Let us look closer at the reason for the birth of Jesus, so that we can understand why the angels were so happy; then, even after two thousand years, we can share their joy.

## THE BEGINNING

The angels would remember a previous time when they had sung together. It was at the creation of the world, when *‘the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy’*. [Job 38.7] But as the Genesis record shows, the happiness of that beautiful earth and

the unity that existed between God and man was shattered by Adam's disobedience. Mankind became cursed by sin and so the creation was no longer the source of Divine pleasure for which it was intended. [Revelation 4.11] The angels then had the sad duty of driving Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden. There was no glory to God in the highest, nor peace on earth as a result of these events.

But this was not the object of man's creation. God planned to reverse this sad state of affairs so that the earth might be '*filled with the glory of the LORD*' [Numbers 14.21]. The angels would have listened when God, in condemning Adam and his descendants to a life cursed by sin and death [Genesis 3.17-19], also promised a way of escape. A 'seed' or descendant of Eve was to be born who would fatally wound the head of the serpent indicating that he would overcome the power of sin through his death and resurrection [Genesis 3.15].

#### THE PROMISE TO ABRAHAM

Later on the angels were to learn more about what this man would do when he came, and would look forward with keen anticipation to that time. He was the subject of a promise that God made to Abraham, a man who put all his faith and trust in God. In recognition of this, Abraham was promised a descendant through whom blessings would come to all nations. [Genesis 22.15-18] Here was another source of anticipation for the angels as they followed events in the history of the world which they had helped to create.

#### THE PROMISE TO DAVID

The Jewish nation was descended from Abraham, and one thousand years later God made to them another solemn promise. This time it was to their righteous king David. Again the promise related to a descendant but now the emphasis was on kingship. As David was king in Jerusalem so David's greater son was to reign on David's restored throne, not just for the brief span of mortal life, but for ever. [2 Samuel 7. 12-16] This reign would be characterised by wise, just government, during a time of peace. [Isaiah 9. 6-7] The fulfilment of



the promise, God said, is as certain as day follows night. [*Jeremiah 33. 15, 20-26*]

The Jews quite rightly considered that these three Divine promises all related to the same person, each foretelling different aspects of his mission. This coming person was styled the 'Messiah' or 'Anointed One', and the advent of this 'Messiah' to fulfil all these promises which God had made was eagerly awaited by devout Jews. They realised that the happiness and well-being of the entire world was bound up with the things that this promised 'Messiah' would do.

#### THE ANGELIC NEWS

So we come back to that night in the fields around Bethlehem. Above were hosts of angels who had long waited for this descendant of Abraham and David. Beneath were humble, devout Jewish shepherds to whom the coming of 'Messiah' was a matter of sincere belief and a lifetime's hope. And the news those angels told to the astonished shepherds was that in the neighbouring village, 'Messiah' (or Christ) had just been born!

The angels were saying in effect that the baby Jesus was that notable descendant of Abraham and David that God had long promised. No wonder they burst into song when he at last was born! But as well as the angels both Mary the mother of Jesus and Zacharias the father of John the Baptist had been told of this great event. It is interesting to note that both connected the birth of Jesus with the fulfilment of God's promises to their ancestors, Abraham and David. Zacharias said that it was *'to perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant; the oath which he swore to our father Abraham.'* [*Luke 1.72, 73*]

Mary used similar words in her song of praise [*Luke 1.54,55*] and when telling Mary about the birth of Jesus, the angel Gabriel clearly associated him with the promise to David:

‘He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.’ [Luke 1.32,33]

### OUR ATTITUDE TODAY

Coming forward to our own times, it must be clear from the beliefs and reactions of those connected with the birth of Jesus, whether angels or men, that we can only understand the mission of Jesus (and therefore be true Christians) if we know and understand these Old Testament predictions that he came to fulfil. It is therefore fatal to any appreciation of true Christianity to dismiss the Old Testament as unnecessary, or to think of it as being superceded by the New Testament. We can only share the joy of the angels if we can understand why they were happy.

So we now ask if Jesus, at his first advent, did everything that God had promised to do. The answer is clearly no – for the earth is still cursed and sin has not been destroyed by the woman’s seed, except in Jesus himself. All nations have not yet been blessed in Abraham’s seed. Nor does David’s greater Son rule eternally in Jerusalem over a peaceful and righteous world. There is as yet no restoration of the Divine intimacy and fellowship with man that characterized the Garden of Eden. It is true that the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross made possible the removal of sin and its resultant evils, but this has not yet been finally accomplished. His death was the means to an end, not the end in itself. At the present time **there is no glory to God in the highest, nor peace on earth.**

But these promises cannot fail. God has sworn them on oath and by His own existence, and as surely as day follows night they will be fulfilled. [Genesis 22. 16-18; Jeremiah 33. 20-26] The only possibility then, is that Jesus must return to the earth again to finally fulfil these promises. This is the clear teaching of the Bible. It became the duty of the angels to announce this second coming as they had announced the



first. Luke tells us that as the disciples watched Jesus ascend into heaven, two angels stood by them and said:

‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw him go into heaven.’ [Acts 1. 11]

The disciples accepted this promise, and the New Testament record of the early Christians shows that the second coming was the theme of their hope and belief. Here are some examples:

**Paul:**

‘For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout.’ [1 Thessalonians 4. 16]

‘the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels.’ [2 Thessalonians 1.7]

‘To those who eagerly wait for him he will appear a second time...for salvation.’ [Hebrews 9. 28]

**Peter:**

‘Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, of which God has spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.’ [Acts 3. 19-21]

What will Christ do when he returns? In brief, he will bless all nations as promised to Abraham, and reign forever as promised to David. For details of this coming kingdom of God, as the Bible calls it, we must take Peter’s advice in the passage quoted above and learn of these ‘*times of refreshing*’ foretold by God’s holy prophets. The writings of the prophets describe the time of blessing for the world

consequent upon the return of Christ to set up the kingdom of God (See for example Isaiah 11.1-9; Isaiah 65.17-25; Micah 4.1-5). Read these passages carefully in your Bible and you will then understand why the angels that heralded the birth of Christ proclaimed that Jesus would ultimately bring glory to God, peace and goodwill on earth.

The Apostle Peter warned his hearers that the second coming of Christ, although so fundamental to true Christian teaching, would eventually be disregarded. He wrote *'that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of his coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation."*' [2 Peter 3.3,4]

These *'last days'* are the days in which we live, and it is sadly true that the vast majority of people, even professing Christians, give little or no thought to the return of Christ to fulfil these ancient promises of God. Yet to the Christians of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century it was all that mattered.

But what will be the effect of Christ's second coming on his true followers? If they have been obedient to him it will be the time of their reward. At that time the dead in Christ will be raised to life again and judged. [1 Thessalonians 4.15,16] If found approved by Christ their righteous judge, they will receive the gift of immortality. [2 Corinthians 5.10; Matthew 25.46] They will then be invited into the re-established kingdom of God on earth [Matthew 25.34] to assist in its administration. [Revelation 2.26,27; 3.21] Finally, they will enjoy equality with the angels and perfect fellowship with God on a planet cleansed of every evil – in the words of the angels to those shepherds in Bethlehem they will finally experience the time when there is ***'glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will towards men'***.

This is why Jesus was born. This was the joy of the angels and the hope of 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians – Is it your hope too?

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# Religious Groups in Bible Times

## The Zealots

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IN the last article we noted that a sect is any group of people who are followers of a particular school of thought, or who share a common interest, whether those thoughts and interests are religious or secular. We considered The Herodians who were a group of people with a common interest – but their interest was more political than religious (see article in volume 21.8). The Zealots were similar and as with the Herodians, our only interest in them from a Biblical viewpoint is to see how their political views impinged on Jesus and Christianity in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

The Zealots as a group are not referred to anywhere in the New Testament, although two particular Zealots are. They were founded in AD 6 by Judas of Galilee who is referred to in Acts chapter 5. The passage records an incident concerning Gamaliel, a prominent Jewish leader, who was urging caution on the authorities in Jerusalem when they were about to kill some of the Christians because of the disturbance that their preaching was causing.

Gamaliel reminded these Jewish leaders that there had been similar situations in the past but that they had not lasted long after their leaders had been disposed of. He assured them that the Christians would follow the same pattern after the crucifixion of Jesus, unless they really were of God. This is what he said:

‘Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves as to what you intend to do regarding these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred joined him. He was killed, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing. After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed.’

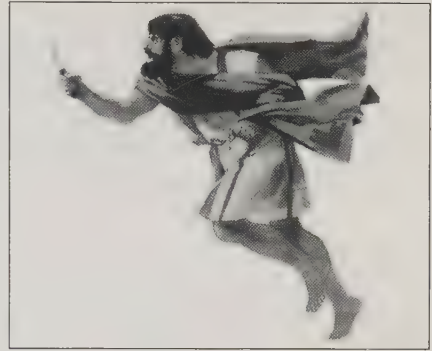
[Acts 5.35-37]

However, Gamaliel’s argument does not stand up to scrutiny and his use of Judas of Galilee to support it undermines it completely. This is because Judas was the founder of the Zealots and they did not just disappear after the death of Judas; they remained a powerful force among the Jews for many years. What is of interest to us is Gamaliel’s reference to Judas leading a revolt against the Romans because of their taxation policy during the census. His refusal to pay taxes to Rome became one of the leading characteristics of the Zealots.

The New Bible Dictionary provides independent confirmation of what Gamaliel was referring to when it says: *‘The census of Acts 5:37, which was marked by the insurrection of Judas of Galilee, was held in AD 6. In that year Judea was incorporated into the Roman provincial system and a census was held in order to assess the amount of tribute which a new province should pay to the imperial exchequer...the suggestion that Israel should pay tribute to a pagan overlord was deemed intolerable by Judas, and by the party of the Zealots whose formation is to be dated from this time’.*

Although the Zealots were more political than religious, they did have a religious base to their ideas. They believed that the Jews should have no king but God, should pay tribute only to God, and that God would not redeem His people until the Romans were driven from the Holy Land. They used any tactics including force, in an attempt to achieve their fanatical objective of overthrowing Roman rule.

The Romans referred to the more extreme Zealots as the 'Sicari', a word which means 'dagger men', a reference to the short handled weapon which they used. These extremists were also known as 'The Assassins' and were not dissimilar to the terrorists that we are so familiar with today.



The Jewish historian Josephus has this to say about the Zealots: *'They have an inviolable attachment to liberty, and say that God is their only Ruler and Lord. They do not mind dying any kind of death, nor do they heed the torture of their kindred and their friends, nor can any such fear make them call any man Lord.'* (Antiquities 18.1.6)

Judas of Galilee, the founder of the Zealots, was apparently inspired by the stand taken by the Maccabees about 170 years earlier in Jewish history. They were also a terrorist organisation and rebelled against the attempts of the Seleucid kings, based in Syria, to control Palestine and to persecute religious Jews by forcing them to do things quite contrary to their Laws. So terrible were the things that the Seleucids tried to impose that Judas Maccabaeus, a leading Jew, founded the Maccabean movement which eventually succeeded in expelling the Seleucids from Palestine and restoring Jewish sovereignty - until about 39 BC when the Romans installed the Edomite Herod family to rule Palestine for them.

The parallels between Judas Maccabaeus and Judas of Galilee go far beyond the fact that they shared the same name. Both lived in times when the Jews had been deprived of their human sovereignty by foreigners. Probably Judas of Galilee feared that the Romans would exert on the Jews the religious intolerance that had been perpetrated by the Seleucids and successfully challenged by Judas Maccabaeus. Both the formation of the Maccabees and the Zealots were triggered by



specific events which transformed a simmering underlying rebellion against foreign rule into active revolt. In the case of the Maccabees that event was a Jew attempting to offer sacrifices to a pagan god on a heathen Seleucid altar in the temple area at Jerusalem; whilst in the case of the Zealots, as we have seen, that event was the imposition of Roman taxation on the Jews.

Unlike the Maccabees, the Zealots failed to achieve their political ambitions. One of their revolts triggered the Roman attack against Jerusalem in 68-70 AD and many of the Zealots died by their own hands in a suicide pact about four years later. However, as an organisation, they were still politically active in 135 AD at the time of the Jews' final rebellion against Rome - a rebellion which led directly to their banishment from Palestine, and to the final and absolute destruction of Jerusalem as foretold by God through the Old Testament prophets. Thus, it was the Zealots who, for all their patriotism and nationalism, were largely responsible for the ending of the Jewish State at that time.

There are only four specific references to the Zealots in the Bible and they are of course all in the New Testament. They all refer to one man - Simon, one of Jesus' twelve apostles (not Simon Peter). He appears to have been a Zealot prior to being called by Jesus. In Luke chapter 6 there is a list of the twelve apostles and verse 15 refers to one of them as '*Simon called the Zealot*'. In Acts 1:13 the same apostle is called '*Simon the Zealot*'. However, in both Matthew 10:4 and in Mark 3:18 the same apostle is referred to as '*Simon the Canaanite*'. This appears to be a translation mistake as both Matthew and Mark were actually calling him '*Simon the Cananean*'. The word '*Cananean*' is a Hebrew word which means '*one who is jealous*' and it is the precise equivalent of the Greek word '*Zelotes*' or, as we would say in English, '*Zealot*'. Thus all four gospel writers agree that this apostle was formerly a member of the Zealot organisation.

A number of ancient manuscripts suggest that Thaddaeus, another of the twelve apostles, may also have been a Zealot. He was the youngest of 'the twelve' and probably only a teenager when Jesus

called him. Thaddaeus was the apostle who, at the last supper, expressed concern when Jesus said that the time had come for him to leave the world although he would be with the apostles for a little while longer. All the apostles were puzzled by what Jesus was saying but it was the young Thaddaeus (also known as Judas, but not Iscariot) who actually asked him *'Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?'* [John 14.22]

It was a natural question from a former member of the nationalist Zealot movement. We know from the New Testament that on their final journey to Jerusalem with Jesus, all the apostles were expecting him to enter the city in triumph as its king. It was on that journey that James and John asked for their particular places of honour in the kingdom which they thought that Jesus was about to establish.

Perhaps, of all the apostles, it would have been the former Zealots who anticipated the most eagerly Jesus' assumption of power from the Romans and we can well understand their bewilderment when his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which fed their expectations, now gave way to his assertion that, so far as the nation in general was concerned, he was about to retire into obscurity and disappear from sight. And we can almost hear the incredulity in the voice of Thaddaeus as he asked Jesus his question – *'Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?'* [John 14.22]

It may be that Judas Iscariot was also a Zealot. If the Zealots were around today they would be regarded as terrorists and it is thought by some that the name *'Iscariot'* derives from that word *'Sicarri'*, and that Judas had been one of the Zealot *'dagger men'* – an active and fanatical freedom fighter. It should be borne in mind however, that there are several possible derivations of *'Iscariot'* and this is only one of them.

Whatever the position insofar as Thaddaeus and Judas Iscariot are concerned, we know for certain that one of the twelve, Simon, was a Zealot and this leads to an interesting final thought. Jesus chose the twelve after a whole night in prayer; he chose them because of what

was in their hearts and not what they looked like to other people. He chose Matthew the tax gatherer and Simon the Zealot – Matthew, whose daily work consisted in collecting tribute for the Romans; a man who became wealthy because of his work, and who owned a very large house in which he held a great and lavish banquet for Jesus. All this was financed by the legitimate and sometimes probably illegal commission he made on the taxes he collected on behalf of the Romans.

On the other hand, Simon the Zealot another of the twelve, also chosen by Jesus, belonged to a group founded specifically to protest violently against the collection of such taxes and tribute, a man who might well have been capable of killing the Romans and their tax gatherers such as Matthew with his terrorist's dagger. Naturally, these two men - Matthew the tax gatherer and Simon the Zealot - would have been poles apart, at each other's throats; yet under the guidance of Jesus, they became part of a small, close team who lived and worked with him for a long time; reconciled by their shared faith in him.

Jesus, as we know, cared nothing for outward appearance. In the Zealots he saw principled men (unlike the Herodians whom we considered in the last article in this series) but men who were mis-directed, men who fought against God by opposing the Roman power that He had put in place in fulfilment of many Old Testament prophecies, and whose divinely appointed task was to scatter His people throughout the world.

But out of diverse groups like the Herodians and the Zealots Jesus chooses a tax gatherer here and a terrorist there to have the whole direction of their lives changed - to become his brethren. To Jesus, what we were and what we still are naturally is of no account; what matters is what we have become and the attempts that we are making to change into people who are becoming more and more like Jesus and his Father.

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# Parables of Jesus

## The Ten Virgins

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FOLLOWING his baptism, Jesus journeyed northward to Galilee to continue his public ministry of '*preaching the gospel of the kingdom*'. [Matthew 4.23] Luke's Gospel is in agreement with this statement and expands it by saying that '*the kingdom*' Jesus preached about was the '*kingdom of God*'. [Luke 8.1]

Jesus was 'king elect' of God's kingdom and this is borne out by his brief discourse with Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judaea. At a time when denial might have secured his freedom, Jesus affirmed that he was the king of the Jews. [Matthew 27.11] This affirmation incidentally, reminds us of something that tends to be overlooked today by many who call themselves Christians; namely, that Israel in Old Testament times was **God's kingdom on earth**. [1 Chronicles 28.5; 2 Chronicles 13.8]

The foregoing references (and others could be cited) give us a clear picture of the **gospel** or **glad tidings** that Jesus preached. Jesus varied his style of preaching; sometimes it was by direct method and at other times in the form of parables. Matthew, after listing a number of parables in chapter thirteen of his record, makes the point:

'...All this Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed he said nothing to them without a parable.' [Matthew 13.34 RSV]

We should not be surprised therefore, to find in the Gospel records (excluding John) a prolific output of some eighty parables by Jesus.

### WHAT IS A PARABLE?

Some of these possibly, are not parables in the strict sense of the word, but are rather extended metaphor. Nevertheless, even the metaphorical sayings of Jesus contain the germ of a parable. Smith's Bible Dictionary definition of a parable is '*a placing beside, a comparison, a similitude, an illustration of one subject by another*'. A good example of this is the parable of 'The Sower'. The scattered seed (the word of God) fell into four kinds of soil, representing four different kinds of people. [Mark 4.1]

A parable is a word picture – an illustration drawn from country life and surrounding objects. It was part of the linguistic culture of the Jews, because we find this mode of teaching used in Old Testament times as well. [Numbers 24.3-9; Ezekiel 17.1-10] Because the parable corresponded with their experience and observation of every-day life, it would the more readily seize upon their attention and be remembered. It would vividly lead them to things which had not yet entered their minds.

To think that the parables are only concerned with the importance of Christian virtues would be a mistake. For example, the parable of 'The Good Samaritan' is generally taken to mean that we ought to do good deeds to our fellow men and women whenever the opportunity presents itself. Obviously, Christian virtues and good deeds are not excluded, but the parables of our Lord are not superficial in their intent. They have a deeper meaning, as this article and others in this series aim to show.

### JESUS TELLS THE PARABLE

Turning now to the parable of the ten virgins, Matthew records it in these words:

'Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the

bridegroom. Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish. Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight a cry was heard: "Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!" Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." But the wise answered, saying, "No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves." And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut. Afterwards the other virgins came also, saying, "Lord, Lord, open to us!" But he answered and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you." Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.' [Matthew 25.1-13]

The reader will have noted at the outset that reference was made to the kingdom of God, yet the parable alludes to '*the kingdom of heaven*'. The kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are interchangeable ideas. Either way, Matthew is recording Jesus' words as he spoke about his Father's kingdom, which is to be re-established on earth not in heaven! This is the consistent teaching of both Old and New Testaments and Jesus referred to it in his well-known prayer:

'Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' [Matthew 6.10]

### THE WEDDING CEREMONY

Looking at this parable of the ten virgins today, it seems strange that the wedding ceremony was taking place at midnight. We are used to attending weddings in the day time and by midnight most of us have gone to bed. However, that was the custom in Bible times. Some



details in the parable are not intended to have a hidden meaning. The fact that there were ten virgins and not a greater or lesser number is incidental to the story. We understand that ten was the usual number of bridesmaids that took part in the marriage ceremony, in accordance with Eastern custom.

One view is that the ten virgins (bridesmaids), met at the house of the bride and from there they went out to meet the bridegroom when his arrival was announced. Another view is that they went out to meet the bridegroom at some convenient point along the road. Together, the whole party would then go to the house of the bride and escort her back to the bridegroom's house. Whichever account is correct neither conflicts with the meaning of the parable. The arrival of the bridegroom was usually at night and as the hour was uncertain, the precise time was always unexpected. Conforming with custom, the bridegroom would send a man ahead of him to shout: '*Behold the bridegroom is coming*'. So the bridal party would have to be at the ready to go out to meet him. It could happen at any time!

Lamps of course, were very important items in the ceremony. It was a regulation that no one was allowed on the streets after dark without a lighted lamp. If the waiting was long, it would follow that the lamps would go out unless a supply of oil had been brought to top-up what was already in the lamp. Once the bridegroom had arrived and the door was shut, it would be unheard of to allow entry to late arrivals.

#### TEACHING OF THE PARABLE

This parable, like other parables of Jesus, had an immediate application as well as a wider meaning applicable to Christians in every age. Jesus' first task was to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom to his own people. He said: '*...I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*'. [Matthew 15.24] They were the chosen people of God. Their whole history should have been a preparation for the coming of the Son of God; they ought to have been ready and waiting for him when he came.

The disciples alone, seeing that he was their rightful king, pleaded, '*...Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?*' [Acts 1.6] Centuries had passed since their last king Zedekiah, had been deposed and the nation taken into captivity by the Babylonians. The Divine assurance given by the prophet however, remained: '*...Though I make a full end of all nations where I have scattered you, yet I will not make a complete end of you...*' [Jeremiah 30.11] The disciples had not misunderstood Jesus' message; they were only premature in their expectation that he would reign as king at his first coming.

On the other hand, the rulers of the Jews were envious of Jesus and saw him as one who undermined their positions of privilege and authority. Their jealousy being so intense, they schemed to kill him. Anticipating his death at their hands and as a consequence of their action, Jesus made the pronouncement: '*...Your house is left to you desolate...you shall see me no more till you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! [Matthew 23.38, 39]*

The Romans fulfilled this prophecy when they sacked Jerusalem in AD 70 and scattered its people throughout the empire. In dramatic form therefore, the parable speaks of the tragedy of the unpreparedness of the Jews of that generation. Effectively they were shut out from the company of those whom the heavenly Bridegroom will welcome and receive.

## THE RELEVANCE OF THE PARABLE TODAY

The parable is as relevant to our times as it was when first spoken, as is evident from the words of Jesus referred to above. The refusal of the Jews to accept Jesus as their Messiah and all that it implied has turned out to be of great benefit to Gentile believers. On this point Paul said: '*...hardening in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in*'. [Romans 11.25] The '*fullness of the Gentiles*' is a reference to the completion of the purpose of God which we believe will take place in our own times. Paul played his part in preaching to the Gentiles the same gospel of the kingdom which his fellow Jews spurned.

‘...It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us...’ [Acts 13.46, 47]

In understanding the gospel of the kingdom, believers are like those virgins of the parable who, with their lamps, go out to meet the bridegroom. Their preparedness is determined by the amount of oil they have ready to keep the light burning. From the book of Psalms, we are left in no doubt as to the spiritual significance of the light emanating from the lamps of this parable. Therefore the Word of God illuminates the darkness of the natural mind.



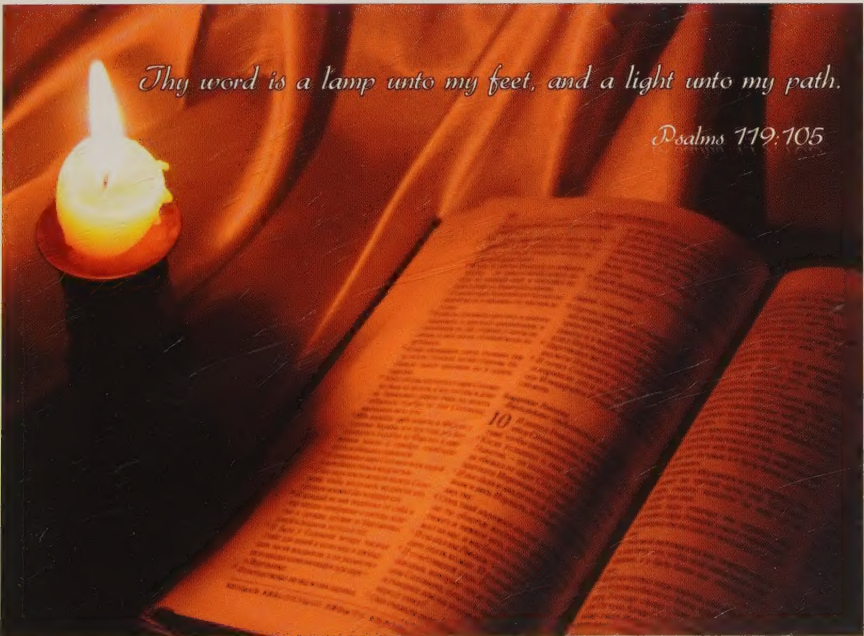
When Israel of old wavered in their allegiance to God, the prophet Isaiah condemned his people for turning to mediums for guidance. He said to them: *‘To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word (God’s word) it is because there is no light in them’*. [Isaiah 8.20] Light is truth, as the Scriptures make plain. Paul speaks of the *‘light of the knowledge of the glory of God...’* [2 Corinthians 4.6] Believers are required to let that light shine as they declare the knowledge of God to others.



The oil is the combustion of the Word of God. The light is the understanding of the truth of God's Word and the love of it; but it can only be sustained by furnishing the mind daily in prayer and reading. As in the natural order, so also in the spiritual - combustion involves consumption and this principle is expressed in Paul's advice to the believers at Colosse: *'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...'* [Colossians 3.16]

### THE NEED FOR PREPARATION

The foolish virgins who had no reserve of oil, answer to those who are delighted with the truth of God's Word on first receiving it. But their interest is short lived and therefore the light becomes weaker. They make no progress in the knowledge of God and no growth in spiritual things. Hence at the crucial hour, they are not fit for entrance into the marriage feast. The lamp requires a regular supply of oil, without which it will eventually flicker and die out.



In the parable, the foolish virgins desperately pleaded for oil from those who had prepared for a longer vigil. They had been wise enough to take a reserve supply. The lesson must be that, when the appointed time comes, we cannot catch up on delayed preparation. A student cannot do the revision he should have done when the examination is upon him. Again, a man or woman cannot borrow a character; they must present their own. There are certain things we must win or acquire for ourselves, for we cannot borrow them from others. In character building, the Apostle Paul considered that all his earthly advantages were worth losing to win Christ. [*Philippians 3.8*]

The fact that all the virgins, both wise and foolish fell asleep, implies that with the best intentions, even the most dedicated of Christ's servants can have their momentary lapses. They can slumber in the sense that, though *'the spirit indeed is willing...the flesh is weak'*. [*Matthew 26.41*]

This parable urges Jesus' followers to watch and prepare, for we cannot predict the exact time of his second coming. Above all, it extends to all who are his true disciples, the gracious invitation to be at the **marriage feast** and to inherit the Kingdom of God. Will you be among those who hear the gracious words from the lips of Jesus?

'Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.'

[*Matthew 25.34*]

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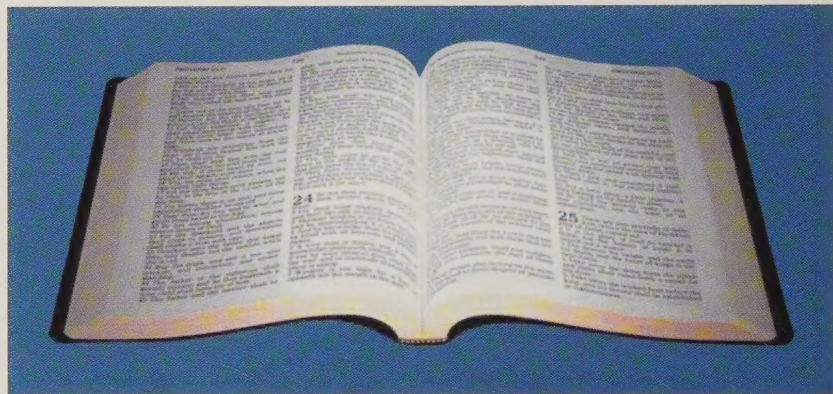
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